

A Controversy Overdue: Günter Grass' Anti-Israel Text

Günter Grass' text "*What must be said*", published in several newspapers, among them the leading German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, has caused a controversy among German intellectuals. After some weeks have passed we can now summarize that an overwhelming majority of the public statements given by leading German intellectuals in several media outlets, talk shows and the like were definitely negative in their attitude towards the text. Most of the statements considered the text a useless provocation, a glitch, a misled PR-stunt, or even a self-revealing piece of latent Jew hatred.

For reasons difficult to understand, the author had declared this clearly political text a poem. Therefore, part of the discussion in the German media focused on the question whether the controversial text deserved to be called a poem. It was suggested that the author tried a different interpretation of the art form of poetry. Others argued he tried to upgrade the text as a manoeuvre of hiding away his political motivation.

In general, the literary quality of the text was considered very low. This alone is embarrassing in case of an author, honoured with the Nobel Prize and esteemed as one of the leading European writers. Many people in Germany to whom I have talked in recent days see the text as the shameful end of a long and successful writer's career and ask themselves whether Grass has long been overestimated as an author. His relevance is being questioned. Many people – who did not dare this until now – publicly confess that they had never liked his novels. With the publication of his anti-Israel-text Grass himself – for many decades a person widely admired – became a target of criticism.

I am on a lecture trip to Germany and Austria these days (May 2012) and see myself confronted with statements regarding the Grass text almost every

day. Many people feel the need to raise this issue, but the majority of those to whom I spoke reject his text.

In fact, in Germany today it is considered politically correct to oppose the text and officially, the overwhelming majority of German intellectuals unite against Grass. Although he may have a lot of support on websites, from anonymous bloggers etc., only a handful of important figures of the German public, the “Öffentlichkeit”, have shown solidarity with Grass, namely these few figures:

- Johano Strasser, current president of the German PEN Centre, an old friend of Grass

- Klaus Staeck, a graphic-artist, currently the president of the academy of Fine Arts in Berlin, a friend of Grass and colleague in the same publishing house, Steidl Verlag, Göttingen

- Journalist and publisher Jakob Augstein, son of writer Martin Walser and adoptive son and heir of the deceased editor of Germanys leading news magazine *Der Spiegel*, both well known for their German-nationalist positions

- Author Jürgen Elsässer and a few other leftist intellectuals. As almost all of the aforementioned have been close personal friends of Grass, their solidarity seems to be rather a matter of personal connection than of political consideration.

The central question of the public discourse is: “Is it allowed to criticize Israel?” The question as such seems nonsensical. Especially from the perspective of Israeli citizens and particularly intellectuals, who use to criticize Israel as a matter of course. Nevertheless the question was raised again and again, with an appellative character as if there really existed a kind of prohibition – as Grass had claimed in the poem – namely that those who legitimately criticize Israel (for Israel is a normal state which is allowed to be criticized as any other state) are being intimidated by a Jewish lobby.

The concept of a Jewish and Israeli lobby cowing German intellectuals in their right of free opinion was introduced for first time (and here I mean for the first time in public after World War Two by a generally acknowledged German intellectual) by writer Martin Walser in his speech at Frankfurt Paulskirche in 1998 when he stated, Auschwitz was instrumented as a “mace” (“Moralkeule”). Since then it is considered acceptable among German intellectuals to ponder about “Jewish circles”, “a Jewish lobby” or an “Israeli lobby” trying to hinder Germans to express what they think.

After Grass used the same line in his text, the concept of a “Jewish lobby” operating in Germany was quickly taken up by media people, for instance on April 5th, 2012 by Thomas Nehls of the WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk), who in the German State television channel ARD spoke of an “alarming campaign against Grass under the influence of a Jewish and German-Israeli lobby in the German republic”. (April, 5th, 2012, website Tagesschau)

In the following, I want to describe several encounters I had with Germans and their take on some of the questions Grass’ “poem” raises, like anti-Semitism and Israel’s role in the Middle East.

At an event in Eisleben (on the 16. Mai 2012; Eisleben is a neglected, but costly restored miners town in former GDR, East Germany): An elderly man, a former teacher and obviously former comrade of the communist party, confronted me, in an aggressive undertone, with the question whether it is allowed to criticize Israel.

My return question: What do you mean? The existence, the legitimacy of the State of Israel or a special political action taken by an Israeli government?

He: The politics of Israel.

In general? I asked

He: The occupation. The refugee camps... I mean, there are a lot of things to criticize in Israel... Is it allowed to do that or am I an Anti-Semite if I dare to criticize Israel?

Me: If you criticize a special political action...

He: Please, answer my question: Is it allowed to criticize this?

Me: It is. Many Israelis criticize special actions of the government. I also do. That's no problem.

He: So I am no Anti-Semite?

Me: You may be one, but not because of this.

The reaction of the audience was laughter. The tension was broken. He seemed extremely uncomfortable with my questions back and changed his attitude. For the rest of the lecture he behaved friendly, even ostentatiously "constructive".

It is typical for people like him to try to blur the border-line between criticizing a special political action and a general criticism of the State of Israel as such. There is a slippery slope from criticism of Israel's political actions and delegitimizing Israel, and the German public knows it.

As I have written in 2005 in my book *Meine Sprache wohnt woanders*, Scherz/S.Fischer, Frankfurt/M., p.199 f.:

(It is claimed that criticising Israel is not Jew hatred, to the opposite, one wants to help us Jews. But these critical questions on Israel's role in this region imperceptibly lead down the path towards questioning the right of Jews to settle here, whether the founding of the state was not an arbitrary act which harmed the interests of other peoples, and whether the Jews not always harm the interests of others for their own advantage, and whether through this kind of behaviour Jews have not always brought about their own calamities, in fact, whether the Jew hatred is not actually the fault of the Jews themselves.)

„Zugleich wird erklärt, Kritik an Israel bedeute noch keinen Judenhass, im Gegenteil, man kritisiere in für uns Juden hilfreicher Absicht. (Doch) die kritischen Fragen nach Israels Rolle in der Region ergeben sich eine aus der anderen, mit einer immanenten Folgerichtigkeit, mit einer ins Dunkel der Verwirrung führenden Konsequenz. Aus scheinbar edelgesinnter Kritik an Israels „Okkupationspolitik“ gleitet man unmerklich hinüber zu der Frage, wieweit Juden „völkerrechtlich legitimiert“ sind, hier zu siedeln, ob nicht bereits die Staatsgründung ein eigenmächtiger, die Interessen anderer Völker verletzender Vorgang war, ob nicht von jeher das Wirken der Juden mit Interessenverletzung und Übervorteilung Anderer einherging, ob dieses Volk nicht immer wieder durch unverträgliches Wesen seine Kalamitäten selbst hervorruft, ob nicht letztlich die Juden schuld am Judenhass sind...“

At an event in (10.Mai 2012), Kaiserslautern I encountered a different take on Grass' argument: an extremely friendly teacher confronted me with an attempt to save Israel from the machinations of the war-monger America, in an adaptation of the constellation which we find propagated by Grass, namely “the Iran as victim”. Israel should not be so naive as to allow herself to be exploited by the United States. Israel is being misused by the Americans...“

In Berlin, on 15th of May, during a lecture I gave in the Jewish Community Fasanenstraße, one participant declared that the affair Grass was basically an “inner-German affair”. Germans became – after World War Two – rather pacifistic, they oppose all warlike activities, feel obliged to warn against being involved in political conflicts that may lead to war – therefore Grass opposition against an indirect German involvement in a warlike confrontation between Israel and Iran was morally understandable and legitimate.

His second line of argumentation, though, ran thus: Grass opposed the financial aid that was connected with the submarine (German government gives one third of the money to be paid to the shipyard).

I told him that Grass in his text had missed the mark, because the money was not given to Israel but to the shipyard building the ship. Indeed, the leading shareholder of the shipyard in question, the Howaldtwerke/Deutsche Werft in Kiel, is the Investment Company of the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi who bought one quarter (25%) of the shares some years ago. Grass' letter does not reflect this crucial point. Either Grass did not know this important fact – in this case the text shows his ignorance – or he hides it from the reader – in this case it shows his hypocrisy.

So my first argument ran thus: the money of the German government does not go to Israel but to the shareholders of the ship building company, among them the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi.

And secondly: When the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi bought a big share of a shipyard that was well known for its submarine building for Israel – what does that mean for the situation in the Middle East? It means that Israel acts regarding Iran in tacit agreement with the Sunni states of the Arab Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates etc.) who all feel threatened by the Iranian nuclear ambitions. There is an alliance of states in the Middle East – and Israel being only one of them – which feel endangered by Iran and act in a kind of – at least secret – agreement in this matter.

This stands in direct opposition to Grass singling out Israel as the “danger for peace” in the region, even in the world.

The audience agreed that singling out Israel stems from a traditional anti-Semitic stereotype, and understood that Grass' text did not reflect the complexity of the current situation in the Middle East, that the writer was incompetent to estimate what happens there, and – for this and other reasons – his text is basically irrelevant.

Yet when it was irrelevant – why all the turmoil? Why is the affair around Grass and his text so important for the German society of today?

In my attempt to answer this question I try to summarize what I have heard from people I have talked to in Germany:

First: Obviously, the text reveals that there is an anti-Israel-bias among German intellectuals, especially intellectuals of the Left. Many of them see Israel as a symbol of capitalism and Americanism. To consider the Jews as a symbol for capitalism is, since Marx and Kaustky, an old anti-Semitic stereotype of the Left

Grass' text reveals the relation of anti-Israeli bias connected to Anti-Americanism. Jealousy, even hatred against the US is wide-spread among German intellectuals and business people. Israel is oftentimes a code word for American hegemony, global ambitions etc. The fact that the US is home to the second largest and wealthiest Jewish community in the world, that America is “ruled by Jews” in the eyes of many anti-Semites, may favour these tendencies.

Many people to whom I talked see the text in connection with Grass' own membership in the SS and accordingly, to his guilt-complex. Grass, they say, uses criticism against Israel and the US (he has been a well known US-hater for a long time) to reduce the guilt he feels as a former SS-member who has – to make bad things worse – kept silent about this past until 2006, for more than 60 years, during the time of his career as a writer and political figure.

People say that Grass had already lost his moral credibility years ago, long before this text, when his SS-membership became public and it transpired, that he told the truth only under pressure when the Soviet Archives in which his SS-membership was listed became accessible. Grass admitted his SS-past only in

the last moment to prevent a discovery by others. Why did he keep silent for so long? Revealing his SS-past at an earlier time, many people say, would probably have altered his career path long ago and would have put an end to his rise to the position of “Germany’s moral consciousness”, and he would most probably not have received the Nobel prize.

Even though the revelation in 2006 would not revoke the accolades, prizes etc. that had been showered upon Grass, he lost most of his credibility.

The majority of the Germans I spoke to consider Grass a rather wretched figure, and not worth the trouble. By his text he helped to make this kind of “criticism against Israel” ring hollow and implausible, creating a kind of Bileam-effect.

The impact of the text was rather bolstering Israel’s position. Leading intellectual and public figures used Grass’ text to declare their general support of the Jewish State in the Middle East. Others gave at least to understand that this kind of incompetence and the attempt to reduce his own guilt by heaping blame on the Jewish state was not the right way to deal with Israel’s complex position in the Middle East.

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